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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 000826

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SUBJECT: GAZA DISENGAGEMENT: FM SHALOM RESURRECTS

REFERENDUM IN NO-WIN BATTLE WITH SHARON; SHINU ANGLING TO

REJOIN COALITION

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶11. (C) Summary: Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom's late-breaking campaign for a national referendum on disengagement has exacerbated divisions within Likud over disengagement, but will fail given steadfast opposition from Prime Minister Sharon and a Likud-proof majority of Knesset members. Likud referendum-supporters have collected the necessary signatures to bring the matter to a vote in the Likud Central Committee (LCC), but a meeting date has not been set. Likud Minister and LCC Chair Tzachi Hanegbi told the Ambassador that he will try to block an LCC referendum vote, arguing that the party had already voted to allow Likud MKs to vote their conscience on the referendum. An LCC vote in favor of a referendum would not be binding on Sharon, but would put pressure on Likud MKs to support a referendum since they are elected by that body. Meanwhile, Shinui leader Tommy Lapid told the Ambassador he had proposed to Sharon that Shinui rejoin the coalition, and Sharon had not rejected the idea out of hand. End summary.

No Knesset Majority for a Referendum

¶13. (C) The effort by Foreign Minister Shalom and other Likud MK's to hold a national referendum on disengagement will not succeed. Currently, at least 66 out of 120 MKs will oppose it: 14 Shinui MKs, 21 Labor MKs, 11 Shas MKs, six Yahad MKs, three Agudat Yisrael MKs, and eight MKs from the Arab parties, as well as maverick MKs Yosef Partizky, Michael Nudelman and David Tal. This number would grow by whatever number of Likud MK's also vote with Sharon. Shas MK Meshulam Nahari confirmed to poloff February 9 that Shas would definitely oppose a referendum. Minister of Infrastructure Fuad Ben Eliezer told the Ambassador February 9 that Labor will vote against it and not remain in the government if the proposal passed. A February 10 article in the daily Yedioth Ahronoth showed only 33 MKs supporting a referendum, with some 80 MKs voting against.

Hanegbi Tries to Avert LCC Vote

¶14. (C) While Likud referendum supporters understand that a referendum could not now achieve a Knesset majority, they hope that an LCC vote in favor of a referendum would put sufficient pressure on Sharon and Likud MKs to support such a move. In a February 8 television interview, Shalom said: "I intend to use all the means at my disposal to convince (Sharon)" to support a referendum. Likud MKs are likely to feel LCC heat since they are elected by that body and could face repercussions in the next elections if they act against an LCC decision. Sharon, as Prime Minister, is elected by the broader Likud membership, so is not as susceptible to LCC pressure. Likud MK Yuval Steinitz told poloff February 9, just after having finished a conversation with Shalom in the Knesset corridor, that he will support a referendum in a LCC vote, and that he expects an LCC majority in favor of holding a referendum. Although Sharon has come out emphatically against a referendum, Steinitz predicted that Sharon would end up supporting a referendum if the LCC votes in favor.

¶15. (C) LCC Chairman Tzachi Hanegbi told the Ambassador February 9 that he is trying to block the move by LCC members to have Likud endorse a referendum. In his view, holding a referendum would spell at least a delay in, if not the collapse of, the disengagement process. He said he opposed the referendum because he does not want to embarrass Sharon, whom he described as "paranoid" about a referendum after the surprise rejection of disengagement in last year's Likud party referendum. Hanegbi said he is arguing to referendum advocates that the Likud Knesset faction has already voted to allow Likud MKs to vote their conscience on disengagement; no further action is therefore necessary.

¶16. (C) Hanegbi said he is particularly concerned about the wording of the proposed LCC resolution, which states that Likud would oppose disengagement until a referendum is held. Worded in such a fashion, the referendum would, Hanegbi pointed out, remove any incentive for disengagement opponents to support a referendum. Should he and other referendum

opponents in Likud be unable to block the LCC vote on a referendum, Hanegbi said they would try to have the resolution rephrased.

Why Now, Silvan?

17. (C) After Shalom's February 8 announcement, referendum opponents, especially within Labor, charged that Shalom, and the other pro-referendum ministers, are trying to derail the disengagement plan or are simply unable to decide whether to support disengagement. Shalom has asserted that a referendum is necessary to avert domestic upheaval over the disengagement plan. Sharon charges that a referendum will have the opposite effect, and that postponing disengagement is a waste of time.

18. (C) Shalom's critics have accused him of pursuing a referendum for personal political gain within Likud and as retribution for Sharon's decision not to take him to the February 8 Sharm el-Sheikh summit. Hanegbi told the Ambassador he was puzzled by FM Shalom's call for a referendum. He said he did not think Shalom was expressing pique over the summit, but allowed that pique could be the explanation. Shinui leader Tommy Lapid told the Ambassador February 10 that Shalom is motivated solely by anger over being excluded from Sharm. Lapid recalled the spectacle created by Shalom at the Aqaba summit over his seating placement, and said there was no way Sharon would have chanced a repeat performance by bringing Shalom to the Sharm summit. Hanegbi speculated that Shalom is more likely worried that his ambiguous position on disengagement is behind his declining support within Likud. As Shalom's position as foreign minister precludes his taking a position in outright opposition to disengagement, he could, in Hanegbi's estimation, be using a referendum as a proxy for appealing to disengagement opponents. Hanegbi said he was unsure whether Shalom would confront Sharon, whose biggest challenge, in any case, could come, he said, from Finance Minister Netanyahu, who has spoken only cautiously so far about a referendum.

19. (C) Likud Knesset speaker and disengagement foe Reuven Rivlin, while announcing February 9 that he has changed his position and now supports a referendum, made the caveat -- clearly directed toward Shalom -- that he would not join "ever-changing campaigns of people whose national motives are sometimes mixed with political ones." Shinui MK Ilan Shalgi told poloff February 9 that he is "ashamed of Shalom" for launching the referendum campaign now, knowing it does not stand a chance, just for his "personal political gain."

Shinui's Gambit

10. (C) Lapid told the Ambassador that he had met with PM Sharon February 9 and had told Sharon that, while Shinui would vote with Sharon on disengagement issues, the party would vote against the budget. "I cannot vote for the budget which drove me out of the coalition in the first instance," Lapid said. Lapid suggested to Sharon -- whom he termed the strongest Israeli Prime Minister in the history of the state -- to call the bluff of the Likud rebels by inviting Shinui to rejoin the coalition, thereby forcing the rebels to decide whether to walk out. Sharon, Lapid said, did not reject the idea but began to count the numbers of Likud MKs who would remain inside if Shinui came back. Lapid told the Ambassador he was not sure whether Sharon's reaction was a tactic or whether Sharon would give the idea serious thought, but the time for decisions was approaching.

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KURTZER